

Brain drain: Mitigatory strategies for a critical issue affecting Italy since over 50 years

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Abstract

The present Editorial, while dealing with brain drain, takes also into account the drivers of this dramatic phenomenon, affecting Italy since over 50 years.

Within such context, a leading factor appears to be represented by the salaries of Italian scientists working in the Academia as well as in other research Institutions, which are consistently lower than those gained by their colleagues working in scientifically advanced, European and non-European Countries.

Notwithstanding the above, the Italian Researchers' Community ranks as the 8th worldwide in terms of scientific output's quality and amount.

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Editorial

Brain drain, a profuse haemorrhage of brilliant female and male minds, is known to affect Italy and the overall Italian Society since over 50 years. Its obvious consequence is the alarming and persistent loss of scientific, educational and creative talents who, after getting graduated in one of our public Universities, leave the Country in search of more appealing, rewarding and successful professional and scientific opportunities abroad, thereby substantially contributing to make more prosperous the economy and the society of the Nations hosting them, with special emphasis on European Union (EU) Countries.

While in line of principle no doubts seem to exist regarding the relevant value of any study or professional experience made in a foreign Country (both in and outside Europe) characterized by an advanced and adequately funded "public research system", the "conditio sine qua non" thanks to which these experiences may become fruitful for those Nations sending their best minds abroad is that, once the study period is completed, the concerned Scientists return back to their home Countries, thus spending and reinvesting there what they have learned abroad. Said in other words, Scientists travelling abroad to enrich their professional life should ideally buy a "two ways", not just a "one way ticket"!

Unfortunately, this is not the case of Italy, which many, far too many Scientists continue to leave forever (I have personally met several of them residing abroad), maybe once a year returning to visit our Country just as "tourists".

The main driver of such a dramatic brain drain phenomenon is obviously represented by the salaries earned by Italian Scientists, which are considerably lower than those gained by their Colleagues working in those Countries by which they are hosted. In order to mitigate this worrisome scenario, the Government led by Professor Mario Draghi had previously announced the adoption of "ad hoc" salary detaxation measures, which have not been entirely confirmed, however, by the Government currently led by Giorgia Meloni.

A clear-cut demonstration of the situation outlined above is additionally shown by the Nobel Prizes won by Italian Scientists, including those awarded each year in Medicine or Physiology. Indeed, differently from what happens in many other Nations, whose recipients obtain their Nobel Prizes while living (and working) in their respective Countries of origin,

this is not the case of Italy, whose winners receive their Nobel Prizes outside the Country in 60% of the instances[1]!

And, while our politicians continue to ignore such a crucial issue from which the social and economic progress and fate of each Nation largely depend, with no Government including it, thus far, as a top priority of its agenda throughout the last 50 years, it should be adequately emphasized that the Italian Researchers' Community ranks as the 8th, on a global scale, in terms of amount and quality of scientific publications and production! This becomes even more meritorious at the light of the portion of the "inner domestic product" (IDP) which is invested by Italy on an yearly basis in public research funding, slightly more than 1% of its IDP, while the remaining 26 EU Countries invest on average 2% of their respective IDPs in this activity of paramount importance[2]!

Notwithstanding the above, I believe there would be some practical "ad hoc" solutions to adopt, in order to mitigate and counteract this alarming and no more sustainable brain drain condition.

The first, obvious measure concerns the money remunerations awarded to Italian Researchers, which should be ideally close, if not similar, to those earned by their Colleagues working in the European and non-European Countries hosting them.

In parallel with this key measure, the IDP fraction devoted to public research funding should be remarkably increased in Italy, thus growing up to 2%, as it happens on average in the other 26 EU Countries. And, in doing so, the necessary continuity should be also warranted to the so-called "Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza" (PNRR), currently benefitting from very consistent money funds awarded to Italy by the EU, in order to make our National Scientific Community fully competitive with that of the other scientifically, technologically and economically most advanced Nations.

There is a further, critical component requiring "ad hoc" attention and efforts, in my opinion, with this being represented by "meritocracy".

As a matter of fact, many, too many times we have witnessed in the more and less recent past a number of almost unbelievable situations characterized by a "lack of meritocracy" in Italy, where talented Researchers have been deemed "unsuitable" for a given academic (or extra-

academic) position, due to the "only reason" another candidate was "protected" by powerful "political influences"! This very frustrating scenario undoubtedly represents, together with the low economic salaries and even more than them, the main cause behind the dramatic brain drain affecting Italy since over 50 years, with these talented female and male Colleagues being forced to buy, at the end of the story, just "one way tickets"!

"Errare Humanum est, Perseverare autem Diabolicum"!

These are, in my opinion, the major criticisms affecting the daily life of the still very productive Italian Scientific Community, with this Editorial also trying to suggest some solutions to the alarming brain drain situation affecting my Country since decades.

The obvious hope (an illusion?) is to see on the next horizon a National Government coalition and its opposition working together and placing this critical issue among their top priorities, in order to avoid Italy becomes a Country where Scientists return exclusively as "nostalgic tourists".

"Spes Ultima Moriens"!

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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